

April 12, 2023

Testimony to Montgomery County Council

Re: Proposed FY 24 Operating Budget

The League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWVMC), through its various study committees, offers comments on the following aspects of the FY 24 Operating Budget for Montgomery County:

Agriculture

- **The LWVMC is pleased to see that the recommended funding for the Office of Agriculture has been included in the County Executive's budget.** This office provides a variety of services to the agriculture community and does a good job of communicating with the farmers and other agencies dealing with agriculture in the county.

Economic Development

- **The League approves of the funding that is provided for a variety of grant programs** both to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship and to create an inclusive economy. We seek assurance that those eligible to receive these grants will be made aware of the available assistance. We note the importance of the Business Center's activity.

Education

- **The LWVMC has strongly supported the Blueprint for Maryland's Future** and its emphasis on ensuring that all our schools are providing an excellent education for their students. **We are glad to see increased funding for its implementation in this budget.** Further, we recognize that many students are still struggling to catch up from COVID-related learning loss and to deal with mental health issues. We applaud the proposed increases in funding for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to meet those needs.
- **We continue to support MCPS participation in efforts to strengthen and expand high quality early childcare and Pre-K programs** so that all children arrive in kindergarten ready to be successful learners. We also support programs that prepare students who are not college bound for careers in fields where there is demand for their skills and opportunity for advancement.

Housing

- The League has a long history of support for affordable housing in Montgomery County. In fact, League members helped create the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) law in the early 1970s – it was the first inclusionary program enacted in the nation. **We are glad to see the proposed budget continues to support MPDUs, as well as other effective programs** such

as the Housing Initiative Fund, programs to preserve affordable units and programs to protect rental housing, such as strong code enforcement.

- Nevertheless, **we are concerned about the proposed 10% increase in the property tax.** The pandemic has been very stressful for tenants, homeowners and landlords of low- and moderate-income housing. A tax increase is threatening to each of these groups and has the potential to increase evictions and homelessness. We wonder whether this is an appropriate time for this tax increase and urge you to consider this very carefully.

Office of the People's Counsel

- **The LWVMC questions why the council has removed funding for the Office of the People's Counsel** whose purpose is to protect public interest and promote a full and fair presentation of relevant issues in administrative proceedings to ensure sound decisions are being made. **We recommend an evaluation of this change** to explore whether the original setup was more effective and we also recommend that the council provide funding for such an evaluation if necessary.

Parks

- The county's parks are a major part of what makes Montgomery County such an outstanding and livable community; these priceless amenities both serve current residents and stimulate economic development. **Adequate funding for park programs and maintenance should be provided.** The County Executive's budget funded only about half the cost increase necessary to support the Parks Department's existing services, programming and maintenance. This is a drastic \$4.3 million reduction from what the planning board deemed necessary.

Transportation

- Of note in the operating budget is **the significant rise in transit numbers when compared to the COVID period. LWVMC greatly appreciates the increase in revenue** from advertising on buses (+144.3%), parking fines (+41.3%) and state aid for RideOn buses (+21.7%). Residential parking permits generated 858% more than during COVID and state aid for highway use was up 20.2%. We hope to see a continued increase as the system normalizes after COVID.
- The LWVMC has some questions about the Bethesda Parking District. Historically, **Bethesda has not generated revenue commensurate with the investments made there and yet the county continues to invest in Bethesda.** We note that Bethesda parking fees are down 13.7%. In fact, the Bethesda Parking District continues to borrow from other parking districts to remain financially solvent, **which calls for a closer analysis of this history and its impact on the annual budget.** The LWVMC looks forward to Montgomery County's recommended changes.

Nancy Bliss & Vicky Strella, co-presidents